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Didier Louis, Cindy Lombart

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## Image and Personality: Two Complementary Tools to Position and Differentiate Retailers

**Didier Louis**

*Laboratory of Economy and Management Nantes-Atlantique (LEMNA),  
University of Nantes (IUT Saint Nazaire), Nantes, France*

**Cindy Lombart**

*Research Centre in Marketing & Distribution IN SITU, Audencia Nantes School of Management,  
Nantes, France*

**[Abstract]** The objective of this research is to study retailers' positioning and the way they are different from each other through the concepts of image and personality. To illustrate this point, eight retailers in three sectors (grocery, clothing and sport articles) that are leading retailers in France in their respective sectors are considered. The tools studied, image, and personality, are, thus, applicable to generalists (in the grocery sector) and specialists (in the clothing and sport articles sectors), as well as to retailers providing utilitarian products (in the grocery sector) and retailers providing symbolic products (in the clothing sector). This research highlights the stronger differentiating power of the concept of personality compared to the concept of image. It also indicates that these tools are complementary. While the concept of image focuses on functional attributes of retailers, the concept of personality concentrates on their symbolic characteristics.

**[Keywords]** retailing; positioning; differentiation; retailer image; retailer personality

### Introduction

Facing a marketplace overflowing with stores, most retailers have spent the past several years tirelessly searching for new ways to grow. In the case of runaway successes, such as the apparel manufacturers Nike and Calvin Klein, the secret appears to be considered as strong, well-leveraged brands (Henderson and Mihas, 2000). Becoming a brand is, thus, retailers' main objective and desired positioning. Traditionally, retailers' positioning was studied through the concept of image. However, some researchers suggested that retailers' positioning could also be studied through the concept of personality (Merrilees & Miller, 2001; Ambroise et al., 2003; Zentes et al., 2008). Since Aaker's (1997) seminal work on brand personality, this concept has been used in the retail field. We define in this research retailer personality as "*the set of human personality traits associated with a retailer.*"

Merrilees and Miller (2001, in an Australian context) first showed that Kmart is a retailer conceived of by consumers as competent and sincere. Ambroise et al. (2003, in a French context) confirmed then that the concept of personality was useful to differentiate two grocery retailers, Carrefour and Leclerc. Finally, Zentes et al. (2008, in a German context) pointed out that the five dimensions of personality used in their research were valuable for differentiating amongst different retailers: Aldi, Ikea, Douglas, H&M, and Media-Markt. For instance, Aldi received high values in competence, sincerity, and ruggedness, but low values in excitement and sophistication.

In this research, we investigate retailers' positioning and the way they differentiate from each other through the concepts of image and personality. This study thus indicates if these concepts are complementary or not and which one is the most interesting for retailers in terms of differentiating power.

### Theoretical Background

#### *The Concept of Retailer Image*

The importance for retailers of effectively monitoring their images has been firmly established and documented over the last five decades. In one of the earliest and most inspirational of the many papers

on retailer image, Martineau (1958) quoted several case studies, illustrating how the success or failure of retailers could often be attributed to undertested or underemphasized attributes of their images. Amongst Martineau's classic case studies were two grocery chains with similar prices, services, and product choices, yet one was significantly outperforming its rival. Image research revealed that management of the struggling chain had not identified the key areas of differentiation. The successful chain was distinctive in being perceived as clean and white, the store where you can see your friends and the store with helpful personnel.

Definitions of retailer image have proliferated as the study of the subject has advanced. One of the earliest definitions of image, specifically in relation to retail stores, was that of Martineau (1958): *"the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes."* This definition emphasizes the need to consider not only the more visible factors but also the less tangible factors. Martineau continued to explain how architecture, displays, symbols, colors and staff attitudes are all key variables. The importance of the subjective nature of image was also stressed by Oxenfeldt (1974): "what exactly do we mean by the image of a store? I submit that it is more than a factual description of its many characteristics. In many cases, it is less like a photograph than a highly interpretative portrait. In other words, an image is more than a sum of its parts."

Both conceptions can, however, be criticized for tending to ascribe a mystique to the concept of image that is not warranted. As Doyle and Fenwick (1974) pointed out: "many of the examples of successful image creation cited by Martineau and other studies depend upon physical, but non-price aspects of the store. Thus, rather than classifying image as part of the non-logical basis of shopping behaviour, as Martineau suggests, it is reasonable to view the customer as rationally evaluating the store on a multi-attribute utility function." Summarizing, the images held by consumers are formed from a combination of factual and emotional attributes. These tangible (e.g., selection, quality of merchandise, price, etc.) and intangible (e.g., store atmosphere, employee services, shopping convenience, etc.) attributes of retailer image serve a predominantly functional role. Thus, retailer image only captures a small fraction of the comprehensive and total picture that consumers establish about a retailer, and it neglects the symbolic role of this retailer. Retailer personality is a metaphor that could help to describe non-functional, abstract, and stable retailer characteristics. Indeed, this concept serves a predominantly symbolic or self-expressive role (Keller, 1993).

### ***The Concept of Retailer Personality***

To conceive of retailers as having a personality is a recent trend in marketing research (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Beyond the well established concept of retailer image, a recent research stream aimed at measuring the concept of retailer personality showed that this concept is a useful tool to position and differentiate retailers (Merrilees & Miller, 2001; Ambroise et al., 2003; Zentes et al., 2008), especially within competing markets where objective differentiation is difficult. This new tool is thus highly interesting for retailers. The concept of personality has been first transposed to brands (Aaker, 1997) and then to other commercial objects, such as retailers (Merrilees & Miller, 2001; d'Astous & Lévesque, 2003) and also, restaurants, banks, TV programs, magazines, etc. For instance, the clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch developed a powerful personality that is fun-loving, independent and sexually uninhibited. The anthropomorphization of brands, retailers and so on, has become commonplace (Brown, 1991). This phenomenon is of great interest for marketing researchers and practitioners. Understanding how consumers perceive various commercial objects in terms of human attributes is likely to be useful for the elaboration and implementation of marketing actions.

Aaker (1997) first defined brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" and argued that consumers naturally attribute personality traits to commercial brands. Absolut Vodka, for instance, tends to be described as cool, hip, and young. However, this definition is too general and may lead to the inclusion, within the brand personality concept, of items having no equivalent at the human level (e.g., western and upper-class). Brand personality should be defined

through traits used to characterize an individual and should, thus, offer the opportunity to transfer meaning from the human personality of consumers to brand personality of the brands they purchase or value. Therefore, Ferrandi and Valette-Florence (2002) defined brand personality as “the set of human personality traits associated with a brand.” Considering this last definition of brand personality, we conceptualize in this research retailer personality as “the set of human personality traits associated with a retailer,” whereas retailer image is a mental representation that encompasses all attributes that are associated with a retailer (e.g., product selection, quality of services offered, etc.) and retailer personality is restricted to those mental dimensions that correspond to human traits. For instance, although product variety is an attribute that may be important in the construction of an overall retailer image, it is clearly not a personality trait, since it is not naturally attributed to a human being. Batra et al. (1993) made a similar argument in distinguishing between brand image and brand personality.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The data was collected from a convenience sample of 524 French consumers aged 19 to 23. First, these consumers selected a familiar retailer. Then, they answered a self-administered questionnaire about the personality and image of this retailer. By allowing for self-selection of the retailer for which the questionnaire was filled out, we ensured that the particular retailer selected was familiar and meaningful to the respondents. We focus in this research on the eight retailers most often chosen by the respondents ( $n \geq 30$ ) that belong to three sectors: grocery (Carrefour, Monoprix & Système U), clothing (Zara, H&M, & Célio) and sport articles (Décathlon & Go Sport) (see Table 1). These eight firms, which are leading retailers in France in their respective sectors, are used to illustrate that the concepts of image and personality are useful for retailers to position and differentiate them. This research thus studies different kinds of retailers and applies the tools considered, image and personality, to the following retailers: generalists (in the grocery sector), specialists (in the clothing and sport articles sectors), retailers providing utilitarian products (in the grocery sector), and retailers providing symbolic products (in the clothing sector).

**Table 1. Percentages of Consumers for the Retailers Considered**

Grocery sector (n=205)		Clothing sector (n=209)		Sport articles sector (n=110)	
Carrefour (n=48)	23%	Zara (n=65)	31%	Décathlon (n=46)	42%
Monoprix (n=38)	19%	H&M (n=30)	14%	Go Sport (n=44)	40%
Système U (n=30)	15%	Célio (n=31)	15%		
Other (n < 30)	43%	Other (n < 30)	40%	Other (n < 30)	18%

## Measures

To measure retailer personality, we used the scale of brand personality developed, in a French context, by Ambroise et al. (2004). Twelve components were identified by this author: glamorous, secure, outgoing, sweet, exciting, elegant, mischievous, cheerful, mature, natural, rigorous and reliable. This multidimensional scale was operationalized through 33 items. Each item was rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale. According to Ambroise et al. (2004), this measurement scale is appropriate to assess retailers' personality (e.g. in a French context, Carrefour & Leclerc).

To measure retailer image, we developed an ad hoc scale adapted from the founding research of Lindquist (1974) and other works in this field of research (e.g., Keaveney & Hunt, 1992; Burt & Carralero-Encinas, 2000). Our purpose was to identify the main components of retailer image. Thirteen components were a priori defined: price, quality, range of merchandise, sales personnel, convenience factors offered, clientele, services provided, promotions, advertising, store atmosphere, store layout, reputation on adjustments and institutional image. These functional components encompass both tangible and intangible attributes of retailer image. They were operationalized through 35 items. Each item was rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale.

## Results

### *Analyses of the Psychometric Properties of the Measurement Scales*

To assess the dimensionality of the retailer personality and image scales, both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were performed. Exploratory factor analyses were first applied to the 33 original items of the retailer personality scale developed by Ambroise et al. (2004). Principal component analyses with orthogonal rotation revealed a three-factor solution. We used the Kaiser's eigenvalue-greater-than-1.0 rule to extract the factors. The eigenvalues are respectively 7.64, 3.05, and 2.07. This three-factor solution accounts for 61 percent of the variance in the measures.

The factors may be labeled elegant/glamorous (factor 1), reliable/rigorous (factor 2) and exciting/cheerful (factor 3). The items with factor loadings below 0.50 and items that loaded substantially on multiple factors simultaneously (i.e., loadings above 0.40) were deleted (Hair et al., 1998). Problematic items were deleted one at a time, followed by another round of principal component analysis. This process resulted in the deletion of 12 items. We also assessed the internal consistency reliability of each of the factors of our measurement scale of retailer personality. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients (1951) are respectively 0.93, 0.82, and 0.86. These measures of reliability are satisfactory, since they are above the minimally acceptable level for preliminary research suggested by Annually (1978) (i.e., 0.70).

Confirmatory factor analysis using the Lisrel program and a bootstrap procedure (500 iterations) was then performed on the 21 items selected on the basis of the results of our exploratory factor analyses. We tested a measurement model composed of 21 indicators and three latent variables. The fit indices obtained are satisfactory as they are close to generally accepted standards (RMSEA: 0.09; TLI: 0.87; CFI: 0.89; Normed Chi-Square: 4.87) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All loadings are significant at the 0.01 level and exceed 0.50 (see Table 2). We assessed again the internal consistency reliability of each of the factors of our measurement scale of retailer personality. At this stage of the research, we computed the Jöreskog's Rhô coefficients (1971). The composite reliabilities of, respectively 0.93, 0.81, and 0.86, are satisfactory. These results confirm the structure suggested by our exploratory factor analyses.

**Table 2. Retailer personality: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (with bootstrap)**

Factors	Items	Loadings	<i>t</i>
Elegant/glamorous	Sophisticated	0.82	44.90***
	Elegant	0.84	46.69***
	Good looking	0.88	61.02***
	Voluptuous	0.77	35.10***
	Stylish	0.79	35.37***
	Charming	0.74	30.14***
	Trendy	0.75	30.25***
	Original	0.68	21.94***
Reliable/rigorous	Secure	0.76	25.77***
	Trustworthy	0.69	17.24***
	Thoughtful	0.62	17.07***
	Intelligent	0.60	15.23***
	Robust	0.51	11.80***
	Reliable	0.58	14.72***
	Adult	0.52	11.32***
Exciting/cheerful	Joyful	0.84	39.45***
	Comical	0.57	13.24***
	Funny	0.59	17.71***
	Cheerful	0.80	32.66***
	Affectionate	0.76	28.05***
	Friendly	0.70	20.44***

\*\*\* *t* values greater than |2.575| indicate that the coefficients are significant at the 0.01 level.

The principal component analyses with orthogonal rotation we first performed to assess the dimensionality of our ad hoc measurement scale of retailer image revealed a six-factor solution. The eigenvalues are respectively 6.49, 2.17, 1.72, 1.67, 1.58, and 1.25. This six-factor solution explains 71 percent of the variance in the measures. Following the process aforementioned, fourteen attributes were suppressed. The alpha coefficients are respectively 0.80, 0.83, 0.75, 0.81, 0.84, and 0.85. The factors may be labeled atmosphere (factor 1), price of merchandise (factor 2), clientele (factor 3), sales personnel (factor 4), quality of merchandise (factor 5) and layout (factor 6).

Confirmatory factor analysis was then run to check the proposed six-factor model indicated by the results of our exploratory factor analyses. We tested a measurement model composed of six latent variables and 21 indicators. The fit indices obtained are satisfactory in relation to generally accepted standards (RMSEA: 0.07; TLI: 0.89; CFI: 0.91; Normed Chi-Square: 3.65). All factor loadings are significant (all *t-values* are larger than |2.575|) and exceed the 0.50 level (see table 3). The composite reliabilities are also satisfactory (respectively 0.81, 0.84, 0.78, 0.82, 0.85, and 0.86). These results confirm the structure suggested by our exploratory factor analyses.

**Table 3. Retailer Image: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (with bootstrap)**

Factors	Items	Loadings	<i>t</i>
Atmosphere	Modern	0.73	22.82***
	Attractive decor	0.85	37.52***
	Fashion	0.53	12.32***
	Pleasant atmosphere	0.73	20.77***
Price of merchandise	Fair prices	0.88	29.70***
	Good bargains	0.72	22.81***
	Good value retailer's brands	0.78	24.74***
Clientele	Self-image congruency between consumers	0.93	25.93***
	Social class congruency between consumers	0.67	18.51***
	Same interest between consumers and employees	0.58	13.39***
Sales personnel	Polite and courteous employees	0.86	33.16***
	Knowledgeable employees	0.79	19.75***
	Quality of services offered	0.66	18.26***
Quality of merchandise	Efficient	0.88	46.55***
	Excellent reputation	0.81	31.77***
	Ease of using products	0.74	27.56***
	Good quality products	0.62	19.02***
Layout	Easy layout	0.88	41.88***
	Ease of finding products	0.77	24.72***
	Quality of displays	0.63	17.52***
	Ease of circulation	0.80	32.59***

\*\*\* *t* values greater than |2.575| indicate that the coefficients are significant at the 0.01 level.

### Study of Retailers' Image and Personality

#### Grocery Sector

In terms of *retailer image*, consumers did not perceive any significant differences between the three grocery retailers as far as the clientele and layout components of this construct are concerned (see Table 4). In contrast, these consumers considered Carrefour as the best retailer as far as the price (compared to Système U & Monoprix) and quality (compared to Système U) of merchandise components are concerned. The main strength of Monoprix is its atmosphere. Finally, the principal asset of Système U is its sales personnel (but at the 0.10 level).

Concerning *retailer personality*, we showed that Carrefour is more reliable/rigorous and that Monoprix is more elegant/glamorous. Finally, Carrefour, Monoprix, and Système U are considered as similar by consumers as far as the exciting/cheerful component of retailer personality is concerned.

Table 4. Grocery Sector: Results

Concepts	Components	Mean scores			Sig. (2-tailed)		
		Carrefour	Système U	Monoprix	Carrefour & Monoprix	Carrefour & Système U	Système U & Monoprix
Image	Atmosphere	3.19	3.13	3.71	0.006	0.707	0.011
	Price of merchandise	4.20	3.66	2.90	0.000	0.020	0.001
	Clientele	2.89	3.20	3.18	0.144	0.166	0.944
	Sales personnel	3.84	4.32	4.01	0.319	0.020	0.095
	Quality of merchandise	4.73	4.20	4.53	0.221	0.004	0.050
	Layout	3.96	4.05	3.79	0.388	0.706	0.302
Personality	Elegant/glamorous	2.46	2.29	3.12	0.002	0.388	0.001
	Reliable/ rigorous	4.33	3.67	3.90	0.014	0.002	0.264
	Exciting/cheerful	2.96	3.18	3.15	0.229	0.352	0.908

### Clothing Sector

Regarding the concept of *retailer image*, the main strength of H&M (compared to Zara) is the prices of the merchandise offered. The principal assets of Zara (compared to H&M) are the quality of the merchandise offered, as well as the layout of its stores (see Table 5). The sales personnel is the main asset of Célio. On the other hand, consumers did not perceive any significant differences between the three retailers considered as far as the atmosphere and clientele components of this construct are concerned.

With respect to *retailer personality*, Zara has been seen by consumers as more elegant/glamorous, H&M as more exciting/cheerful, and Célio as more reliable/rigorous. However, when comparing the differences in means, we cannot validate that Célio is the most reliable/rigorous retailer. While the difference in means between Célio and H&M is significant for the reliable/rigorous component of retailer personality, the difference in means between Célio and Zara is not significant for this specific component.

Table 5. Clothing Sector: Results

Concepts	Components	Mean scores			Sig. (2-tailed)		
		Célio	H&M	Zara	Célio & H&M	Célio & Zara	H&M & Zara
Image	Atmosphere	4.10	4.20	4.30	0.557	0.180	0.555
	Price of merchandise	4.58	4.90	4.36	0.150	0.248	0.007
	Clientele	2.88	2.81	3.06	0.718	0.280	0.157
	Sales personnel	4.54	3.78	3.99	0.001	0.001	0.295
	Quality of merchandise	4.52	4.08	4.65	0.020	0.362	0.000
	Layout	4.12	3.63	4.28	0.031	0.406	0.002
Personality	Elegant/glamorous	3.65	3.87	4.45	0.194	0.000	0.000
	Reliable/ rigorous	4.07	3.53	4.03	0.005	0.750	0.004
	Exciting/cheerful	3.69	4.31	3.33	0.003	0.009	0.000

### Sector of Sport Articles

In terms of *retailer image*, the differences in means between Décathlon and Go Sport are all significant except for the atmosphere and clientele components. The main strengths of Décathlon are, thus, the prices as well as the quality of the merchandise offered, its sales personnel, and the layout of its stores (see Table 6). With respect to *retailer personality*, Décathlon has been seen by consumers as the most reliable/rigorous, elegant/glamorous, and exciting/cheerful retailer.

Table 6. Sector of Sport Articles: Results

Concepts	Components	Mean scores		Sig. (2-tailed)
		Décathlon	Go Sport	
Image	Atmosphere	3.41	3.28	0.470
	Price of merchandise	4.49	3.92	0.001
	Cientele	2.87	2.74	0.527
	Sales personnel	4.45	3.91	0.004
	Quality of merchandise	5.00	4.48	0.001
	Layout	4.37	3.88	0.008
Personality	Elegant/glamorous	2.72	2.29	0.024
	Reliable/ rigorous	4.59	3.88	0.000
	Exciting/cheerful	3.43	2.89	0.002

### Conclusion and Discussion

The objective of this research was to study retailers' positioning and the way they differ from each other through the concepts of image and personality. To illustrate this point, eight retailers were considered. These retailers pertain to three sectors: grocery (with Carrefour, Monoprix & Système U), clothing (with Zara, Célio & H&M), and sport articles (with Décathlon & Go Sport). Consequently, we first showed that the tools considered, retailer image and personality, may be applied to different kinds of retailers: generalists (e.g., Carrefour) and specialists (e.g., H&M, Décathlon), as well as retailers providing utilitarian products (e.g., Système U) and retailers providing symbolic products (e.g., Zara).

Then, regarding the results presented in this research, we believe that the concept of retailer personality should not be seen as a substitute to the conventional concept of retailer image but rather as a complement. Retailer image measures typically include functional aspects linked to tangible (e.g., quality of merchandise, etc.) and intangible (e.g., store layout, etc.) attributes. Retailer personality measures non-functional, abstract, and stable retailer characteristics. Indeed, this concept focuses on the symbolic or self-expressive role of retailer while image concentrates on its functional role.

Finally, we highlighted in this study more differences in means considering the concept of retailer personality (67%; 14/21) rather than the concept of retailer image (45%; 19/42). The difference between these two proportions is significant ( $p < 0.10$ ). Hence, from a managerial point of view, the differentiating power of the concept of retailer personality is certainly encouraging. Indeed, our results showed the stronger differentiating power of the concept of retailer personality compared to the concept of retailer image. The concept of retailer personality, which differs from retailer image, allows retailers to position and differentiate themselves from competitors. Again, this does not mean that researchers and practitioners should completely abandon the study of retailers' image. This only means that they should sharpen their analyses by integrating the concept of retailer personality. One important implication of our study is that a balanced approach, where functional and symbolic characteristics of a retailer are taken into account through the concepts of image and personality, is recommended.

Retailer personality is an important but recent topic in marketing research. Future research should investigate the antecedents of this concept (e.g., communication, etc.) to understand the process by which a retailer personality is built. The consequences of retailer personality (e.g., satisfaction, attachment, commitment, etc.) should also be studied to highlight the impact of this concept on consumer behaviour. The potential congruence between consumer's personality and retailer's personality should be tested, too. The impact of this congruence on consumer behaviour should be investigated, and congruence analyses should be realized to orient marketing actions aimed at improving the match between target consumers' self-perceptions and retailer personality.

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